



SYNTHESIS OF EX ANTE EVALUATIONS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES 2014-2020

Executive Summary

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E-mail: AGRI-EVALUATION@ec.europa.eu

*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

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1. Background

In line with the EU2020 Strategy for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the overall Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) objectives offer a holistic and integrated approach to policy support during the 2014-2020 programming period, through pursuing the competitiveness of agriculture, the sustainable management of natural resources and the balanced territorial development of rural areas throughout the EU. For the purposes of promoting rural development policy through Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) these broad objectives are structured around:

- **6 priorities for rural development**, broken down into 18 Focus Areas which define policy emphasis with respect to the identified needs for interventions and
- **3 cross-cutting objectives**, namely, Innovation, Environment and Climate Change.

In addition, a *Common Strategic Framework (CSF)* is established for all European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to improve co-ordination between them. Under the CSF, each Member State (MS) has developed its Partnership Agreement (PA) which reflects the objectives and targets of EU2020 Strategy and lay out the integration of the ESIF.

2. Rural development policy framework and budget

Compared to the previous programming periods, there is **increased flexibility** in the use and combination of measures (20 in total) to better address specific territorial needs, along with measures with a clear contribution to the EU2020 priorities; result-orientation in the choice of measures which are associated with specific quantified targets; an improved monitoring and evaluation system; ex ante conditionalities and performance review.

The EAFRD budget for Pillar II in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020 is €99.6 billion in current prices. The share of expenditure between Pillars may change in 2014-2020, with the possibility for MS to transfer up to 15% (up to 25% in some cases) between Pillars enabling them to better target spending to specific needs and priorities.

3. The evaluation framework

The **role of the ex ante evaluation** with regard to the design and the evaluation of RDPs is **threefold: a) matching the RDP to the needs of the area, b) fitting RDPs into the bigger picture** (CAP Pillar I, ESIF and other national/regional funds) **and c) setting the foundation for evaluating RDP achievements**. Also, the ex ante evaluation proceeds in parallel with: a) the PA development, b) the RDP development and c) the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

In accordance with Article 79 of Reg. (EU) 1305/2013, a **synthesis of the ex ante evaluations** at EU level must be undertaken under the responsibility of the Commission. The objective of this synthesis is to provide an analysis and synthesis of the ex ante evaluations of the RDPs and National Rural Network Programmes (NRNPs) 2014-2020 with a focus on specific themes, to identify common trends, highlight differences between the programmes and provide conclusions and recommendations on the study themes.

4. Methodological approach

4.1 Descriptive part and four evaluation themes

The analytical component of the ex ante evaluations' synthesis covers a descriptive part and four evaluation themes, namely: 1) **Process of the ex ante evaluations** (Evaluation Theme 1); 2) **Intervention logic and internal coherence** (Evaluation Theme 2); 3) **External coherence and added value** (Evaluation Theme 3); 4) **Six thematic clusters of actions** (Evaluation Theme 4).

The **Descriptive part**, contains a concise overview of the 115 ex ante evaluation reports, provides overall information on the quality and design of RDPs, the verification of objectives and targets, ways

for better targeting of measures and a common learning process related to monitoring and evaluation. Two key evaluation questions and twenty eight sub-questions have been answered in this part.

Evaluation Theme 1 assesses whether the ex ante evaluations were carried out in an appropriate way. This assessment covers the steps undertaken, the relations with rural development stakeholders and the Managing Authority, the coordination with other ESIF and whether the ex ante evaluation influenced the RDP design. For this theme, five key evaluation questions and thirteen sub-questions have been answered.

The **intervention logic in Evaluation Theme 2** is considered to be the **central issue** of the RDPs evaluation, dealing with the clarity of objectives, their consistency with each other and the SWOT analysis, the identification of needs and the selection of the relevant measures. Furthermore, Theme 2 covers the measurement of effects and impacts, the assessment of how realistic the programme targets are, and described links between outputs and results. The programme governance and control are also considered. This Theme consists of six key evaluation questions and thirteen sub-questions.

Evaluation Theme 3 is concerned with the extent to which the RDP measures contribute to the goals of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth of the EU 2020 Strategy and the extent to which RDP measures reinforce other policies under the Common Strategic Framework. In this Theme two key evaluation questions and four sub-questions have been answered.

Evaluation Theme 4 has a thematic focus. The thematic clusters selected for analysis cover a specific range of issues in rural development that reflect the **specificities of the 2014-2020 programming period** and help build an understanding of the logic of the intervention and explore synergies with Pillar I of the CAP and other Funds. The clusters concern: 1. Investments; 2. Knowledge transfer, advisory services and European Innovation Partnership (EIP); 3. Agri-environment-climate; 4. Forestry; 5. Young farmers, small farmers and areas with natural constraints; 6. Risk management.

4.2 Methods and tools for quantitative and qualitative analysis

The analysis of the descriptive part and the four evaluation themes is based on a **combination of methods and tools**, following an approach, to provide clear, logical, evidence-based and relevant conclusions and recommendations. This approach consists of several tools: 1) analytical grids and templates; 2) survey of the Managing Authorities (MAs) and stakeholders, and 3) case studies and additional information. The main source of information were the ex ante evaluation reports and the 115 national/regional RDPs in the EU 28 Member States. Additional information was sourced in the Partnership Agreements, the SEAs and other existing relevant national/regional reports and qualitative and quantitative data at European and national/regional level.

5. Key Findings and Recommendations

It should be borne in mind that this synthesis primarily draws on the ex ante evaluation report (as they were available in May 2015) and gives an analysis and overview of what the ex ante evaluations (EAE) have found and what were the recommendations made. This synthesis was performed during the period when a significant part of the RDPs (60) were still being further developed. The **key findings** of the synthesis and relevant recommendations are analyzed as follows.

5.1 Key Findings

Co-ordination of RDPs-EAEs-SEAs, integration of recommendations from the EAE and lessons learned from previous programming periods

- Almost all evaluation reports describe and assess **all three steps in the RDP design** (i.e. Step 1 - SWOT and needs assessment; Step 2 - Construction of the programme's intervention logic; Step 3 - Defining governance, management and delivery systems, finalisation of the programme document, integrating the ex ante evaluation report). In many countries/regions, the analysis was more focused on the first step and least on the third step.

- **Cooperation between MA executives, EAE and SEA experts** was carried out in a satisfactory manner in the majority of the Programmes (>75%).
- The use of **Steering Groups** supporting the RDP design process **was not a common practice**, however other organisation structures have been used to provide a steering role (e.g. working groups).
- In nearly 2/3 of the EAEs **the evaluators have checked** whether a) all **legal requirements** for the RDPs external consistency **are covered**, b) the **monitoring system and evaluation plan are suitable**, c) the **structures and processes** foreseen **for selection of Local Action Groups (LAGs) and LEADER implementation are adequate**. Concerning the LAGs selection, in most cases this process is based on past experience and has incorporated lessons learned. Gaps in information were most often observed in the adequacy of the structures and processes foreseen for LAG selection and LEADER implementation, as well as in the insufficient evaluation of the monitoring and evaluation plans, due to lack of information provided by the RDPs.
- Furthermore, the evaluators have checked in all five RDPs concerned (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, ES-Andalucía and Castilla La Mancha) whether **thematic sub-programmes respond to the needs identified**.
- In nearly 63% of the countries/regions, **all recommendations of the evaluator have been fully considered** in the design and content of the RDPs. In cases where recommendations given were not fully considered, relevant justifications have been provided. In some instances MAs had difficulty to address recommendations dealing with quantifying indicators and prioritising findings of the needs assessment, as well as, with spatial monitoring of environmental impacts.

Rural development stakeholders' involvement in the process of ex ante evaluation

- In 79% of the cases, **sufficient involvement of stakeholders in the RDP design process** is reported. According to the survey results, the most significant lesson learned from the previous programming period in relation to the stakeholder's involvement concerns the **early introduction of public consultation** in the process.

Internal coherence and consistency of needs, objectives, measures and forms of support as well as coherence between CAP Pillars

- For most RDPs (78%) the ex ante evaluations attest that the **RDP objectives are clearly defined and well related to the needs established through the SWOT analysis and the needs' assessment**. Instead of contradictions, synergies have been identified in several occasions. One good example concerns a matrix included in the EAE, which depicts interactions between specific objectives. This matrix indicates that there are no negative interactions that could constitute contradictions. On the contrary, there are numerous synergies a) between objectives corresponding to the same priority; and b) between objectives corresponding to the priority of innovation and other thematic priorities.
- On the other hand, the presentation and assessment of expected impacts was found weak. Only 27% of the evaluators agree to the statement that based on the information in the EAE, the expected impacts of the RDP are well documented.
- Over 70% of the evaluators agree to the statement that the **logical links between selected measures and programme objectives are very clear**, well described, and stem from the needs assessment; and that the **distribution of expenditure is consistent with the programme objectives**.
- Detected **information gaps** concern: a) the **adequacy of forms of support**, which mainly relate to grants and subsidies, b) the **links between planned actions, expected outputs and results**, which were not well documented and c) the **establishment of arrangements for coordination with CAP Pillar I**, which is evidenced in almost half of the cases.

Horizontal themes: equal opportunities, prevention of discrimination, sustainable development and advisory capacity

- Within the horizontal themes, **sustainable development is most prominent** in the RDPs, while other aspects such as advisory capacity, gender aspects, equal opportunities and non-discrimination, are less emphasised.

"External" coherence and consistency with Europe 2020 Strategy, other ESI Funds and the Partnership Agreement

- In the majority of the RDPs, the **objectives are clearly linked to the goals of EU2020 Strategy**. The programmes support actions that contribute to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, while some RDPs particularly focus on sustainable growth.
- **RDPs objectives and planned measures are to a very high extent consistent with the ESIF and the PA** in 72% of the countries/regions, while in the remaining cases relevant information is missing. **Coordination and alignment between funds are ensured** in 63% of the cases via different mechanisms, most of them being coordination committees consisting of representatives of the concerned bodies. Good examples of coordination mechanisms between different funds, concern the establishment of a coordination committee, a joint monitoring committee and thematic networks at national level and inter-funds coordination groups at regional level.

Monitoring and evaluation arrangements as well as provisions for control and verification

- **Only about half of the RDPs are dealing with target values for indicators** directly related to the achievements of focus areas **in a satisfactory way** (i.e. realistic, plausible, based on past experiences).
- For **less than half of the RDPs** the ex ante evaluations attested **the clarity of the arrangements for control and verification** at the level of measures. Several types of provisions have been explicitly mentioned in some reports, such as data processing with IT tools, governance and communication procedures between the relevant institutions, selection/monitoring/controlling and payment procedures. On the other hand, the limitations and bottlenecks identified concern staff limitations, quality of technical tools, and verification of data consistency and calculation methods.
- **Monitoring and evaluation plans were inadequate** or even missing in about 1/3 of the programmes, mostly because the synthesis was performed during the period when a significant part of the RDPs (60) were still being further developed.

Thematic clusters (results from the case studies)

1. Investments

Regarding investments in the RDPs examined, **EU15** countries focus their RDPs on the **improvement of living conditions in rural areas** and the prevention of depopulation, whereas **new MS** focus more on the improvement of **physical assets**. **Complementarity with other structural funds** regarding investments in **infrastructure and irrigation is generally achieved** in the cases observed through regulations and coordination mechanisms between the institutions concerned.

2. Knowledge transfer, advisory services and European Innovation Partnership (EIP)

High quality in the provision of knowledge transfer and advisory services is **ensured through entry requirements for the supported organisations**. Synergies and complementarities between knowledge transfer and advisory services with other rural development measures are present in all case studies and cover a wide range of measures. The measures for knowledge transfer and advisory services will indirectly contribute to complementarities and/or synergies with CAP Pillar I measures, especially in the field of greening and cross compliance. The use of **exchange schemes and visits** is limited. Explicit provisions for linking advisory services and researchers within Operational Groups are mostly lacking in the case studies, except for three cases.

3. Agri-environment-climate (AEC)

All MS have made **significant** efforts to design **AEC measures in a manner which ensures coordination and avoids double funding with Pillar I greening**. The MAs have heavily concentrated on the operational aspects of AEC measures, with a focus on establishing demarcation lines between the scope of AEC measures and greening requirements. As a result, clear links between similar interventions under the two Pillars in terms of expected outcomes/synergies for the protection of natural resources and the production of public goods, are missing. In some cases, the MAs were led to a search for added value of the proposed changes. The collective management of Ecological Focus Areas (EFAs) and AECMs via collective management and conservation plans, adopted for the specific

geographic area, aim to ensure better and consistent land management practices and raise the value of AEC measures. The use of tailored farm management plans with sound environmental objectives specific to the farm level was highlighted as an innovative tool.

4. Forestry

Member States aim to apply the **thresholds** for the need for forest management plans or equivalent instruments at a level that **includes a majority of forest holdings** as well as forest areas. All cases examined argue that one of the key elements is to **verify the environmental value of land to be afforested**. All MS examined have checks and administrative arrangements to prevent inappropriate afforestation and ensure protection of biodiversity. Information on different types of areas, land use and environmental value of the areas that are included in afforestation schemes is limited.

5. Young farmers, small farmers and areas with natural constraints

Synergies under the **two Pillars** can be observed **in particular in the case of young farmers**. The rationale for young farmer support under the two pillars is similar, i.e. facilitating generational renewal with pillar I support providing additional income aid, whereas the M06 sub-measure is a lump sum payment/business start-up support conditional on the submission and implementation of a business plan. Regarding the small-farmers scheme, of the RDPs studied only a small group of countries/regions have decided to introduce support under this measure, mainly due to the additional administrative burden that may occur. All MS studied paid **a lot of attention to the complementarity aspect** in relation of **eligibility criteria** and for **synergies between the two CAP Pillars**. Of all MS only Denmark decided to introduce payments for areas with natural constraints under Pillar I. At the same time such payments are no longer included in the Danish RDP.

6. Risk management

The **emphasis on risk management** in the cases studied is given by sub-measure 17.1 "**Crop, animal and plant insurance premium**". **Methods for calculating losses** / drop in income and **administrative costs** are **manifold**. For example, some MS have included in the calculation of income losses biological and climate indexes, while others plan to use national indices with data for yield loss and annual production. Regarding the administrative costs on setting up the risk management tools, some MS use different methods to calculate them and some others do not calculate these costs.

5.2 Overall recommendations

1. **Lessons learned from the previous programming periods and good practices** should be disseminated to all countries/regions. These experiences may refer to the following issues:
 - Procedures related to LAGs selection and LEADER implementation;
 - Implementation mechanisms to ensure an integrated approach to territorial development and encourage direct links between CLLD and investments supported by ERDF (the role of the ENRD is crucial at this point);
 - Systems of extensive collaboration and dialogue between farmers and advisors for the provision of tailor-made farm advices;
 - Solutions introduced at national level regarding the AEC measures implementation, such as collective land management plan;
 - Design of risk management sub-measures.
2. **Stakeholders' involvement** in the ex ante evaluation and the RDP design **should be further enhanced** through the early introduction of public consultation in the process.
3. The internal coherence of the RDPs should be improved by a better presentation of the **adequacy of the chosen forms of support**, their **coherence with measures, actions and specific objectives**, as well as, of the **links between planned actions and expected outputs** and, even more, **the links between expected outputs and results**. This could be done e.g. through the use of relevant matrices, figures or charts.
4. Demarcation of intervention areas and/or beneficiaries, complementarity and synergies with CAP Pillar I and the ESIF should be improved through the **establishment of coordination bodies** and the **use of common information management systems**. A good practice concerns the establishment of common monitoring committees, thematic networks and working groups at national level.

5. With regard to future demographic changes in rural areas, the **RDPs contribution to the objective of inclusive growth should gain more weight** at the level of objectives, actions and budget allocation.
6. **Defining methodologies for establishing impacts** will be for MAs an important task for evaluation already during the implementation phase and especially for mid-term (2017 and 2019) and ex post evaluations.
7. **Appropriate arrangements for control and verification** at the level of measures need to be ensured, especially with regards to human resources and expertise as well as governance and communication procedures between the involved institutions.
8. The Commission should develop further **guidance on the design of new sub-measures** (e.g. in risk management), **indicators, monitoring and evaluation issues, as well as, coordination mechanisms and management structures**.
9. **Guidance** should **focus** on **capacity building and peer to peer exchange** between MAs and other actors involved, through the **dissemination of good practice examples, reflection workshops and seminars**.
10. Regarding **investments**, close **monitoring of the implementation** of **Measure M04** is critical, since this measure turns to be the **most popular type of RDP intervention**.
11. The impact from the implementation of M07 "Basic services and village renewal in rural areas" should be assessed, as this measure is used to improve living conditions in rural areas, especially in cases where the allocated budget for this measure at national level is relatively low compared to M04 "Investments in physical assets".
12. **The links between agricultural practice and research should be strengthened**, by ensuring the involvement of advisors and practitioners in the EIP operational groups.
13. The implementation of **AEC measures and greening measures under Pillar I** should be closely monitored at country level, in terms of **possible synergies to be attained** and ways of reducing **administrative costs**. In addition it should be investigated whether the farmers' interest in participating in AEC measures has been reduced.
14. In geographical regions in which AEC measures have not been very popular so far, it should be considered to evaluate if and how Pillar I greening practices have increased the agri-environmental awareness of farmers and encourage them to reach out for AEC measures.
15. Regarding forestry, there is scope to **improve the quantification of indicators for both the RDP implementation and targets set at national/regional level**, e.g. public funds for investments in forests and restoration measures; afforestation areas; increase in forest areas through the RDP implementation; increase of forest land coverage; indicators of hemeroby (proportion of certain natural woodland areas); forest areas of High Nature Value.
16. Evaluations regarding a) **contribution to generational change and encouragement to enter the agricultural sector** in long-term perspective by support offered to young farmers under Pillar II, b) the **agrarian structure changes** in countries which have decided to choose the small farmer scheme under Pillar II and c) the reasons that the support for natural constraints under Pillar I did not attract the attention of MS, should all be considered.
17. Risk management related policies should adopt a holistic approach (considering increasing uncertainties due to price volatility of global agricultural markets and due to climate change), rather than deal separately with individual risks.

